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SUBJECT: JOURNALIST RETRACTS SOME ABUSE CHARGES...THE RIGHT ONES

REF: YEREVAN 983

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11. (U) SUMMARY: A local journalist, Gagik Shamshian, beaten up in July (reftel) has retracted allegations that a local official's brother was involved. The retraction seems to have come under duress from local authorities, who have filed unrelated criminal charges against the journalist. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) On August 15, Gagik Shamshian, the photo correspondent of the Fourth Estate and Aravot newspapers, informed RFE/RL that he had been misquoted in his earlier fingering of Ruben Hovhannisyan, brother of the Erebuni Community leader, as a ringleader in Shamshian's beating. (NOTE: The Erebuni Community is a level of local government--akin to a ward or precinct in the U.S.--within the city government of Yerevan. END NOTE) Shamshian now claims that Hovhannisyan, the main suspect in the alleged July 12 group assault, had neither attacked him nor taken away his cell phone and tape recorder, as he had earlier claimed. Hovhannisyan had been arrested and later released on bail because of Shamshian's earlier statements. Recanting his previous account, Shamshian said that Hovhannisyan had actually tried to restrain the others in the group from beating him. Shamshian categorically rejected--to the media--any notion that threats or pressures against him had caused him to change his story.

13. (U) On August 22, Aravot newspaper published an article reflecting on Shamshian's contradictory utterances, reporting that the photographer now blames his defense attorney for misrepresenting his words. However, Aravot's Editor-in-Chief, Aram Abrahamyan, asserts that Shamshian's change of story clearly has resulted from pressure to exonerate the well-connected Hovhanisyan. Shamshian's retraction came shortly after local police launched a criminal case against him on separate charges.

14. (SBU) COMMENT: We agree with Aravot's assessment that the photographer was intimidated into changing his story. Corroboration of this scenario will come if the charges filed against Shamshian are soon dropped, as we expect. While we still do not believe high-level government interference to be the culprit here, this case illustrates that press intimidation can at times be most effective when it comes from the lower echelons of the bureaucracy. END COMMENT.

EVANS